“[T]his will be [a] city yet; such water power wasn’t made for nothing.” Jeremiah Colgrove (Spear, 473)

“After taking a turn in the road, behold these factories and their range of boarding-houses…the machinery whizzing, and the girls looking out of the windows…with heads averted from their tasks, but still busy…” Nathaniel Hawthorne, North Adams, 1838 (Coogan, 341)

“A steam engine in a factory…possess[es] a malignant spirit; it catches one man’s arm, and pulls it off; seizes another by the coattails, and almost grapples him bodily;-- catches a girl by the hair, and scalps her;--and finally draws a man, and crushes him to death.” Nathaniel Hawthorne, North Adams, 1838 (Coogan, 431)

“The best and only wish I have for the place is, that the anvil and the loom may soon cease their operations, and that the grass may grow and flourish the length and breadth of your streets.” Nolens Volens, North Adams, 1860 (Coogan, 431)

“Like most villages in the Berkshires, North Adams had no native or landed aristocracy, even of the middling sort. Its rapid growth in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras was due to merchants and industrialists who, by hard work, political maneuvering, a ready embrace of new technology, unabashed scamming, and simple good luck, had attained wealth and influence.” (Lee, 13)
CHRONOLOGY

1854 – Construction begins on the Hoosac Tunnel.
1864 – Blackinton Woolen Company is the largest woolen mill in Berkshire County.
1868 – Adams establishes a “poor farm”; sold to North Adams in 1884.
1870 - C.T. Sampson brings in 75 Chinese workers to break a strike. Soon after, 31 members of the Knights of St. Crispin start their own cooperative shoe factory.
1874 – The Hoosac Tunnel is completed.
1878 – North Adams separates from Adams and becomes its own town.
1883 – Arnold Print Works, with 2,000 employees, becomes the world’s largest producer of textile dyed fabric.
1886 – The Knights of Labor sponsor the first Berkshire County Labor Day celebration at the North Adams Fair Grounds, with more than 3,000 in attendance.
1892 – Senator William McKinley, along with 3,000 local residents, attends the dedication of the new Plunkett mill, a project aided by the McKinley sponsored tariff.
1896 – North Adams becomes a city.
1899 – Fourteen North Adams labor unions, members of the American Federation of Labor, have a combined membership of 1,000.
1900 – North Adams population peaks at 24,100, and the city is the largest in Berkshire County.
1901 – Adams is the first community to erect a statue of President William McKinley after he is assassinated.
INTRODUCTION

For most of the nineteenth century, the area we now call North Adams was the north village of the town of Adams. Nearly two-thirds of the town’s 12,000 residents lived in the north. As that area industrialized, while the south village remained mostly agricultural, the two developed separate identities. In 1878 the north separated and became its own town, leaving the south village to retain the name of Adams. In 1896, North Adams became a city, incorporating a mayor-council form of government.

Located in a valley some seven hundred feet above sea level in the mountainous northwestern corner of Massachusetts between Vermont and New York State, North Adams served as the trading center and railroad hub for communities in the northern Berkshires. Its relative isolation did not, however, insulate it and the neighboring towns from the ups and downs of 19th century wars and business cycles. Its mill owners and industrialists followed the main chance, and the workers of the region tried to protect themselves, forming unions and fraternal organizations, striking the factories owned by the emerging capitalist class and cooperating with each other to enhance their standard of living.

The North Berkshire geography limited the region but also offered it opportunities. Mill owners took advantage of the Hoosac River's power to build here, and in the 1850s, the state as well as several private investors chose the Hoosac Range to its east as a site to drill a railway tunnel offering a Western "gateway" for local and regional trade. Located at the foot of Mt. Greylock (the highest point in the state) and between the Hoosac and Taconic ranges, North Adams enjoyed a southerly rail connection with Pittsfield since 1846. As the new railroad also connected to the Boston-Albany line, local residents could now take the train to the state capital (Michalenko 4). Prior to that time, inter-regional travel was limited to weekly stagecoaches from Albany and Greenfield (Rudolph 3).

Reverend Washington Gladden, minister of North Adams’ First Congregational
Church and a leader in the Social Gospel movement, describes such a ride over the Hoosac Mountain:

When the heats of noon are past, and the sun begins to sink behind the Hoosac mountain we will prepare for our stage ride of eight miles to North Adams. Persons who have been [on] this overland trip have discovered that the true luxury and glory of travel are only to be found in the stage coaches...The grand scenery and the bracing air of the mountains are full of delicious intoxication...Jim [our driver] learned his trade in a long apprenticeship among the White Hills, and he is fond of talking about that region; and yet he maintains that the scenery over the Hoosac is hardly surpassed in that famous resort of travelers. (Spear, 497-8)

Textile mills, both cotton and woolen, as well as iron forges processing local ore, burgeoned after the War of 1812. The first textile mill in the area had in fact begun operation in 1812. By 1830, 15 factories (12 cotton and three woolen) operated there (Spear). The 1850 census marked the official shift of the town from agriculture to industry, since more factory workers than farmers now resided in the town (Sesquicentennial). In a period of only two decades, the town’s population doubled, and the percentage of employment in manufacturing rose from about twenty-five percent in Adams (1820) to almost sixty-six percent (1840), reflecting the source of the county’s earliest textile development (Coogan 273). Now the site of the biggest manufacturing center in the western part of the state, “[o]nly Lowell boasted of having more factories in the state than Adams...” (Coogan 274)

Nineteen of the county’s thirty-one cotton mills were located in Adams in 1837, and cotton and woolen textile production increased even faster after 1842 when the Adams-Pittsfield railroad link came into reality (Op.Cit.75 and 82). In 1859 one reporter “described North Adams as a `bright and thriving’ village with about three thousand people, and `a line of manufacturing establishments running along the Hoosac River for three quarters of a mile’”(Roberts 22, from Parise 8).
While the first half of the nineteenth century marked a time when Berkshire County's industrial proletariat was being formed, it was a time of crucial formation for its capitalist class as well. As mill workers labored 13 hours a day under dangerous conditions and barely made a living, the factory owners enjoyed the bounties of their production, and by 1860, Adams was second only to Pittsfield in the number of economic elites within its boundaries (Hardy). In 1800 only about two percent of the county’s economic elite lived in Adams, but by 1860 that figure had jumped to nearly fifteen percent (Hardy 38). Of the 22 members of the elite there, at least fifteen engaged in manufacturing. According to Hardy, for the most part, "the county's manufacturing elite in 1860...was made up of men who came from modest backgrounds, started small mills, and ultimately acquired sizable fortunes" (49). By 1860, for example, Sanford Blackinton already owned property worth nearly a quarter of a million dollars (Ibid. 97).

In both 1800 and in 1860 Berkshire County’s elite totaled about three-tenths of one percent of the population. In the earlier period, though, the elite did not possess significantly more wealth than the next "class" in the county. That changed by 1860. Not only did sizeable differences in wealth holdings now exist within the elite, but a sizeable gap had developed between it and the class below (Ibid. 38-41). Stratification had increased in Adams and in the county, and one could now speak of the "truly wealthy" (Ibid., 90).

The Civil War and its immediate aftermath brought rapid growth to the region. North Adams’s population nearly doubled (from 6,924 to 12,090) from 1860 to 1870 and the number of cotton looms it boasted climbed from 22 in 1840 to over 200 in 1870. Diverse, but continuous waves of immigrants, helped to form the growing industrial labor force, making Adams the most industrialized community in the Berkshires by 1860 (Coogan 448). First came the Irish in the 1830s, followed by the Welsh and the French-Canadians in the 1860s, and the Italians towards century’s end (Gabrielsky 25).
The early mill workers of the 1830s and 1840s in Adams tended, however, to be native born, often young women who came to town from their farms and rural communities. We learn of one, Sarah Sanders, who left her family’s log cabin in Savoy at the age of 12 to work in a small mill in Adams in 1830. Work began each morning at six and concluded at 8:30 p.m. every day except Sunday. When Sarah began work, she earned fifty cents a week plus board, and after five or six years of work, had a wage of $1.50 a week but without board (Coogan 361). Mill workers of that time labored in close proximity with their supervisors and even the mill owners, and that closeness and paternalism tended to bring about generally peaceful labor relations.

The intensity and pace of work increased in the 1850s and 1860s and brought with it an increase in industrial accidents and labor strife. Stories of these accidents, many the result of new machines, filled the local papers. In 1864, one such article described the case of a new worker who “seriously broke his arm in two places because he did not properly know how to run the crank on a machine; whereas another worker at the Union cotton factory seriously injured himself when his finger got ripped off while he was working with the gearing” (Coogan 433). While one strike occurred as early as 1853 at Oliver Arnold and Company (Ibid. 424), labor relations really heated up in the late 1850s, again at the Arnold mill, an action which led to a near general strike throughout the town.

Arnold’s female weavers struck for both higher wages and payment in cash (not company credit) on August 19, 1858. They took to the street and marched in line to the A.P. Butler & Company mill, shouting slogans and “waving their bonnets”. From there, the reinforced procession moved to Sylvander Johnson’s warp mill, singing along the way. Then on to Braytonville and the A.W. Richardson & Company where more mill workers joined their ranks. Meanwhile, another march of 140 female operatives, reminiscent of the militant daughters of farmers who worked and struck the mills of Lowell, headed down Main Street carrying their colorful banners along the way.

Everyone ended up at Harmony Hall where they heard speeches “calling for united resistance against the millowners of North Adams.” The following day brought another procession of striking workers on to the streets, preceded by a band. Over one
hundred people joined with banners exclaiming “‘The Laborer is Worthy of His Hire’” and “‘Give Us Our Old Wages.’” The marchers once again met at Harmony Hall with resolutions calling for higher wages and payment in cash. Despite general ridicule from the press, the women workers would not be dissuaded and the demonstrations continued for two additional days (Coogan 437-440).

In 1864, Arnold’s female operatives struck again. According to one newspaper account, those who refused to honor the strike were “threatened by their gentle feminine former co-laborers with a coat of tar and feathers.” (Ibid. 452-3) Weavers and tunnel minors also struck that year. High on the Adams millworkers’ demands was a shorter work week – from as many as 13 hours a day to 11 (Ibid. 453). While the mill owners and other well-to-do residents of Adams worried about this growing militancy, they also feared an increase in crime and in poverty. One response to those fears in Adams and throughout the nation was the growing temperance movement (Ibid. 454-5).

Three Important “Workplaces”: The Hoosac Tunnel, Blackinton Woolen Mill and C.T. Sampson Shoe Factory

While the southern rail connection opened up the region’s trade with Pittsfield, and indirectly with Boston, the local business class had a grander scheme in mind: a tunnel through the Hoosac range which would not only make the region’s link with Boston more direct, but when combined with a rail line to Albany, forty miles to the west, would place North Adams at the hub of a transportation center to the western United States. (The Legislature scrapped an earlier plan to build a canal from western Massachusetts to the Erie Canal when the expense of erecting more than 200 locks over the Berkshires was deemed too extravagant. Boston Sunday Globe, July 27, 2003, M12) The rail connection would, its local boosters hoped, “represent an open door to the riches of the Golden West,” earning North Adams its motto, “‘We hold the Western Gateway.’” (Coyne 6-7) In 1860 a local newspaper waxed indignant when England’s Prince of Wales visited Lenox, in the southern part of the county, but
ignored the tunnel: “’[I]t seems curious that the Prince should have gone right by the Hoosac Tunnel, the greatest in the world, without expressing the desire to take a royal peep’” (Ibid. 18).

Despite the local boosters, construction of the tunnel, begun in 1854 and completed in 1874, proved both frustrating and dangerous, costing the lives of 195 workmen. The tunnel’s construction force numbered as many as 1,000—Irish, English, French-Canadian, and Italian—adding a frontier element to a diversified workforce engaged in the manufacture of a range of products now including woolen and cotton goods, shoes, and textile machinery (Rudolph).

Scenes around the shafts while work was going on were reminiscent of mining camps in the far West. There were rows of small cabins and cheap boardinghouses where the tunnel workers slept and ate. A mixture they were of races and creeds…Children poured in and out of the squalid houses where women, speaking foreign tongues, were busy with cooking and babies. Roughly dressed men, black with grime, went in and out of the diggings (Federal Writers’ Project 3).

By the time of its completion, other competitive gateways to the west meant that the tunnel didn’t bring with it as much business as its boosters had hoped. Nonetheless, North Adams had become “a Western gateway,” and its residents enjoyed the sight and business of numerous passenger and freight trains coming through on a regular basis. The tunnel did lead to industrial growth in what was then called the North Village, and helped precipitate the decision for the North to separate and become North Adams in 1878.

By 1880, 125 freight trains a day lumbered through North Adams (Baker 17). In what may well be an exaggeration, one historian claimed that “[e]ven the much boasted Springfield, with its years of development and prestige, is not today a more important railroad center than North Adams…” (Spear 513) There was no disagreement, however, that at the time the tunnel proved to be the longest in the United States, and the second longest in the world.

By 1864, fed by government orders for Union Army uniforms, the Blackinton
Woolen Company had become the largest in Berkshire County (Baker). The mill’s management actively recruited skilled workers for the woolen work including a significant number from Wales. In fact, the 1870 census revealed that of the 848 people in the state of Welsh nationality, 543 lived in Adams (which would include the North prior to the split in 1878). Of those 543, the census listed 514 as laboring in the woolen industry (Etman). Many came from Newton, Wales and lived in Blackinton village, a separate community between the North Village and Williamstown, with its own school, church, post office, firehouse, retail stores and cemetery.

The North Adams Iron Company achieved fame during this period as well by manufacturing iron plates for the U.S.S. Monitor. Immigrants continued to settle in the region and by 1870, one-third of the population was foreign born, chiefly from Ireland and French Canada.

As with many of the other rising industrial centers in the state, North Berkshire’s growth emanated from the production of textiles as well as shoes and boots. The Knights of St. Crispin, a secret union of workers in the latter industry, found a sympathetic workforce in North Adams. State-wide, the Crispins formed one of the most formidable labor organizations in New England, with some forty thousand members (Bedford 3). In North Adams, French-Canadian men formed the bulk of its membership. Relatively new to North Adams, the men had migrated from Quebec, part of a huge exodus of more than 250,000 farmers who left Canada between 1850 and 1870, seeking a better living than the hardscrabble farming provided them and their families. Industrialists in New England actively recruited the French-Canadians (whom they called the “‘Chinese of the Eastern States’”) and the men, often without families, initially found work in western Massachusetts, notably in Holyoke and North Adams (Lee 149). United by culture, history and class, the men supported each other and brought that solidarity into the Crispins. In fact, they proved so successful in agitating for better working conditions and wages, that they forced the area’s leading shoe manufacturer, Calvin Sampson, a seventh-generation descendant of Plymouth Colony’s Abraham Sampson, to import 75 Chinese men from California to
break the union’s power in 1870 (MBSL, 1880).

When the Chinese workers arrived at the North Adams railroad station, a large crowd watched, probably more in wonderment than in anger, since most if not all of the locals would have never seen any Chinese person, let alone 75 at one time. The national press had journeyed to North Adams to record the spectacle, and it was, apparently, a non-violent crowd, at least in deed. The Crispins maintained their focus on their employer and his (mis)deeds, and did not blame or scapegoat the Chinese strikebreakers. In fact, they soon tried to organize the Chinese workers into their union. Washington Gladden, Social Gospel minister and author who served the North Adams Congregational Church from 1866-1871, summarized this unusual chapter in North Adams history as follows:

The self-restraint of the working-people of North Adams, in the presence of this irritating spectacle, was a cause for gratitude. Although these Chinamen continued to live in the community for several years, there was very little disposition to interfere with them; they were permitted to go and come without insult or annoyance. The philanthropists of the community soon made these Orientals the object of their care, and various well-meant endeavors to teach them the English language and fit them for self-support and citizenship were promptly set in operation. In truth, the experience of North Adams with the Chinamen was an encouraging instance of the absorbent power of good sense and good will in an American community, in dealing with an acute case of social inflammation. (Gladden 173)

Besides helping to put North Adams on the national map as the Tunnel had previously done, Sampson’s union-busting experiment brought him low wage labor and high profits for the next three years. However, less than a month after the Chinese arrived in town, thirty-one Crispins bought and began operating a worker-owned cooperative for the production of shoes on Brooklyn Street, directly competing with Sampson. In September, following the lead of the Crispins’ North Adams Cooperative Shoe company, a former Sampson employee (William Vial) started another cooperative (Lee 181). Along with the Knights of Labor, who also successfully organized in the region, the Crispins pushed the cooperative as a positive way for workers to step outside of the wage exploitation system. French Canadian shoemakers first formed a cooperative in St. John’s, New Brunswick in February, 1869, and within a few years dozens of shoe coops had been established throughout the Northeast from Maine to Baltimore (Lee 181).

The Crispins’ coop in North Adams was smaller than Sampson’s shop, utilizing only six sewing machines and one pegging machine, in contrast to thirty-five sewing and three pegging machines at Sampson’s. Working around the clock, the Crispins produced one
hundred cases of shoes a month, managing one quarter the output that Sampson’s workers produced. As Sampson had a famous photo taken of the Chinese workers in front of his factory, the Crispins had a photo taken of themselves as coop workers. An examination of the Crispin photo by Anthony Lee shows that the Crispins, along with other workers they hired, actually posed themselves by one side of Sampson’s factory! Rather than take the picture by their own wooden shop, they preferred to be, almost literally, in Sampson’s face. “It was a deliberate, pugnacious, provocative gesture, not to say an indication of stealth and wiliness. One can only imagine how they managed getting inside and pulling off the picture.” (Lee 182)

The Panic (aka Depression) of 1873 ended the Crispins’ experiment. Despite the hard times of the Panic and its aftermath, labor activism continued in the region. In 1876, for example, 600 Blackinton workers, mostly Welsh and English, responded to wage cuts and shortened hours by striking for three and a half weeks (Baker). The Knights of Labor, the nation’s largest union, continued to advance the cause of working people, both inside and outside of the workplace. In September of 1886 the Knights sponsored the first Berkshire County Labor Day celebration at the fairgrounds, a most successful event combining athletics, entertainment and political speech making (Hoosac Valley News, September 4, 1886).

Textiles Reign Supreme: the Arnold Brothers and William B. Plunkett

As the national economy improved, factory production gained strength. By 1883 the Arnold Print Works had not only reached the top rung of local industrial employment, with some 2,000 workers, but had also become the world’s largest producer of textile dyed fabric. Emigrants from Rhode Island, Oliver, Harvey and John Arnold, had been involved in several textile enterprises since 1829 in North Adams, though not as a threesome until 1843. In 1861, they built their own print works on Marshall Street and production began in 1863. Spurred by demand for Union army uniforms, the firm did well and continued to expand. A fire in 1871 destroyed the company’s eight buildings, but the Arnolds rebuilt on a different site a year later, but still on Marshall Street. Now, F. H. Arnold, Harvey’s son, came on board, while Oliver and John sold their shares to Albert C. Houghton, a future president of the print works and later the first mayor of North Adams.

While the Panic of 1873 hurt their business, as it did the other factories in town, a year later the print works had a profit of $100,000. The Dunn Credit Bureau characterized the company owners as being “shrewd, calculating, persevering businessmen” whose operation
was now “the most successful in the country” (“The Arnold,” 1). An integrated operation, the company owned four textile plants in North Berkshire to manufacture the cloth, and built a series of mill buildings on its sprawling Marshall St. site for the printing operation. By 1883, APW had become the largest print dying plant in the world, and the buildings on its site had increased to 26. The print works also maintained an office in Paris to keep in contact with the latest developments in fashion and an office in New York to design the new patterns. APW continued to do well despite growing Southern textile competition, in part by utilizing “'new machinery…follow[ing] fashion trends closely…and diversifying its products” (Ibid.)

A.C. Houghton, now the treasurer of the company, had been purchasing more and more of the equity from the Arnold brothers, and by 1876 had become the main force at the print works. In 1882, a new brick building was constructed for dying print cloths indigo blue, “probably the largest building in the world for that purpose” (Spear 534). In 1888 total sales and profits proved larger than any other manufacturer in North Adams at $4 in sales and $143,000 in profits (Seider, “Nineteenth” 3). The continued success of APW helped push textiles past the boot and shoe industry as the most profitable industry in North Adams by the mid 1890s. Each day, one thousand employees at the mill turned out 200,000 yards of fabric. At two other North Adams mills, the Eclipse and Beaver, some one thousand workers produced the cotton cloth for the print works (Cole 76). Additional cotton cloth came from mills the firm owned mills in Williamstown and North Pownal, Vermont. At its height, some 3,200 employees worked for the huge print works.

Low labor costs undoubtedly helped APW’s bottom line and, as with other local industries, the print works followed the "latest developments" in child labor also, employing youngsters "between 10 and 15 years of age, and some under" for eleven hours a day (MBSL, 1872, 351). At the start of the 20th century, APW had become the largest employer of Italian workers in North Adams. Italians, the last of the major waves of immigrants of the late 19th century, tended to live on State Street and in the Union Street area, near the print works. They faced significant discrimination in the city, and disproportionately received low wage, manual labor work. Prior to 1900, the print works only hired Italians in what was called the “blue dip” building. Here, where blue dyes were produced, the dirtiest work on
the vast site took place (Tavelli and Hauck). From a number of only 336 in 1893, the North Adams Italian population grew to nearly 1,500 in 1910. Reflective of the community’s growth and religious conviction, they built St. Anthony’s Church in 1906 (Stevens).

Given the centrality of textiles in the North Berkshire economy, it should come as no surprise that an industry manufacturing textile machinery would be born and develop in North Adams. Fourteen years after migrating from Scotland, James Hunter started his long-lived family business making machine castings in a small shop alongside the Hoosac River. The company grew, built modern brick structures on Main Street and incorporated in 1891 as the James Hunter Machine Company. With James E. Hunter holding numerous patents on textile machinery, the company’s woolen mill machines could be found all over the country. Well into the 20th century, local skilled machinists were able to find work at Hunter Machine (The Transcript, Oct. 27, 1995).

The largest city in Berkshire County at the time, North Adams’ population peaked in 1900 with a total of 24,100. Economically, textiles and shoes still served as the foundation of its industrial base, but competition from Southern mills could now be felt. While the Federal tariff could not shield the region from domestic competition, it certainly protected local textile manufacturers from European producers. In Adams, an overwhelmingly textile town, its leading capitalist, W.B. Plunkett, himself the son of Irish immigrants, had developed a strong friendship with William McKinley. The Plunkett family had been involved in textile manufacturing since the early 19th century, incorporating the Berkshire Cotton Manufacturing Company in 1899.

Unable to find enough employees locally to work at his low wage, but growing, textile mills, the Plunketts encouraged immigration to Adams, mostly from Poland. While it remains unclear if any of the company’s representative actually traveled to Poland to recruit, from 1895-1905 a total of 1,400 Poles migrated to Adams. Now, forming about one-seventh of the town’s population, the Poles established their first church in Adams, St. Stanislaus, in 1904.

Before he ascended to the presidency, Senator McKinley played a leadership
role in pro-tariff legislation, and received honored guest treatment during three visits to Adams during the 1890’s. The tariff was a huge boost to Plunkett and other American manufacturers since the high tax it placed on imports kept foreign competition out. (While the tariff meant more jobs for local residents, it also had the consequence of raising prices for American consumers.) When the McKinley tariff passed in 1890, Plunkett planned a second mill. When it was completed in 1892, McKinley helped dedicate the building before a crowd of more than 9,000. On the day that McKinley was nominated for the presidency in 1896, Mill No. 3 went into production. A year later McKinley visited Adams yet again to lay the cornerstone for town’s new library. In 1900, President McKinley visited Adams once again, this time laying the cornerstone for Plunkett Mill No. 4. When an assassin killed McKinley in 1901, Adams became the first town in the nation to erect a statue to his memory. One can still view the well-placed likeness of McKinley, facing south in McKinley Square, within sight of the Plunkett mills, speaking out for the tariff (Carney 160-2). Given the economic, political and ideological power of the region’s capitalist class, it should come as no surprise that while a statue of a business-friendly president greets visitors to the center of Adams, no nineteenth century statue stands honoring North Berkshire’s textile workers nor the 195 men killed building the region’s "Western Gateway," the Hoosac Tunnel, in North Adams

**HISTORY FROM BELOW AND THE PUBLIC RECORD**

At this point, after recounting the early years of North Adams’ industrialization, we should pause and critically examine the sources that researchers use in constructing social history. How do the sources we use, and the questions we ask, shape the social history we write?

Michael Seif, in a review of 19th century local history, notes with surprise “that there is not more evidence of labor unrest” in North Adams. He quickly adds, though, that the lack of a written record of numerous strikes may not reflect a quiescent labor force. Rather, the problem
may lie in the manner in which traditional history tends to be written, from the point of view and in fact often by the economic and political elites of the day. In the case at hand, for example, "The Transcript, the city’s principal newspaper, was sympathetic to and supportive of the manufacturing community. If there were a strike or a serious labor incident in one of the mills, it did not rate headline treatment in a newspaper whose owners believed in the aspirations of the business community as an article of faith" (Seif, 88). Richard Bennett echoes that view in his analysis of the use of Chinese labor to break the 1870 Sampson shoe strike in North Adams: "Poverty, discontent, and conflict were there, but one would hardly know it from reading the Transcript (Bennett 11 and Ch. VIII). One might add that the standard 19th century histories of Berkshire County (e.g. Beers and Spear) display similar biases. Further, many of the working people in the area were illiterate, and even those who could read and write tended not to keep diaries or written records relating to work. Simply put, to use the language of the new labor history, most of the historical sources and writing on local labor history practiced "history from above," rather than "history from below." (See Levine et al., Who Built America?, for an example of the latter.)

Some sources do exist, however, that help rectify this imbalance. The annual reports from the Massachusetts Bureau of the Statistics of Labor (MBSL), begun in 1869 under labor and reformist pressure, provide periodic reviews of strike and lockout activity in the state, and through other investigations carried out by Bureau personnel, offer additional assessments of workplace activism. For example, the 1880 report chronicles strikes in the state from 1825 through 1879. During that fifty-five year period, 159 strikes and lockouts have been identified by the Bureau. Of that total, eleven occurred in North Berkshire (nine in North Adams, two in South Adams). (Lanesborough, a rural neighboring town just outside of Cheshire, recorded a twelfth strike, of twenty iron ore miners at the Iron Works in 1875.)

That number appears very significant when compared with similar activity that the 1880 report summarizes for other, more well-known, industrial cities in the state: Lynn, 14; Lowell, 10; Fall River, 8; and New Bedford, 6 (Ibid., 64). This comparison based simply on the number of strikes and lockouts would suggest that North Adams and the North Berkshire region produced a high level of militancy in contrast to the larger industrial cities in the eastern part of the state. (As part of a single strike, the Bureau includes workforces from more than one mill,
and even from different towns, that may have joined a local or regional strike. Thus, for example, an 1878 woolen strike in North Berkshire involved operatives from three mills, and North Adams is "credited with the strike as it started at Blackinton Village, while workers at a Williamstown mill joined in as well."

The narrative description for each of the strikes, while brief in many instances, often offers insight into the factory conditions of the day and worker culture. The first notation to a local strike occurs in 1853 when "(t)he operatives at Arnold & Co.'s factory in Adams... secured an increase of pay after a strike of two days in the latter part of April" (Ibid. 14). The writers of the report spend less than a full sentence on this strike, reserving more space for longer strikes with more employees. Yet one should note in this case that the Adams strikers were successful, a result reached by workers only eleven percent of the time during this review period. Five years later, when operatives at Blackinton won a short strike, the context of the textile strikes of 1858 merits consideration:

The manufacturers of textiles throughout New England had found it necessary to reduce rates during the dull season. As business now began to mend, the operatives, in various mills, impatient to reap part of the benefit which they felt this revival was bringing to employers, struck for a return to prices previously paid. For the most part, these demands were premature, and therefore failed; for, although goods were selling more rapidly than during the winter, the outlook was not yet sufficiently promising to warrant higher wages. Of this class were brief strikes at Salem, Newburyport, and West Springfield. The operatives at the Blackinton Mills, Adams, were more fortunate; there, the desired increase was almost immediately granted. (emphasis added, Ibid. 16)

In 1866, a small group of weavers struck an Adams factory for a day or two and accepted a wage "compromise" (Ibid. 21). In 1868, the Bureau reported on a walkout of workers belonging to the Knights of St. Crispin at the biggest shoe factory in North Adams, owned by C.T. Sampson (25). Two years later, as previously noted, a similar walkout led to Sampson's importing seventy-five Chinese men from California to break the strike and the union (Ibid. 28).

Also in 1870, weavers struck two woolen mills in South Adams, at B.F. Phillips & Co. and at P. Blackinton. In both cases the weavers demanded that wages be restored to previous rates. "Both strikes brought defeat to the operatives, who in eight days returned to work at the rates offered" (29). While the account doesn't specify
it, one might assume that both groups of workers coordinated their activities.

The next local strike cited by the Bureau leaves no ambiguity about worker cooperation, this time by different occupational groups within the same factory. In 1872 the "fine" weavers struck the Renfrew Manufacturing Company of South Adams over a reduction in wages. The company then proceeded to redistribute the looms adding the "fine" work to the "coarse" work already performed by the remaining weavers. "To this the coarse weavers objected and also left." (32) The striking workers, now totaling about 175, stayed out another two weeks. However, unable to win the strike, they accepted the company's terms and all returned together.

The severe panic of 1873 led to wage cuts throughout the state. The Bureau records what happened next:

The decline was accepted in the hope that it would be temporary only; but, after the opening of the year 1874, no prospect appearing of a voluntary increase on the part of the employers, strikes occurred in several factories to force a return to prices previously paid. As might have been predicted, these were generally failures. Trade was constantly decreasing in volume, and the outlook was not encouraging. In spite of this, however, the operatives at various woollen mills in North Adams, after contesting the matter three days, early in January, succeeded in obtaining a slight advance in wages. We have no other such instance to record. (34, emphasis added)

The Bureau provides no further details. One must note here not only the wage increases won during a very difficult time, but the fact that operatives from several mills coordinated their efforts.

In April of 1875, laborers working on a small railway tunnel in North Adams (not the Hoosac) were fired after demanding higher wages. When a new workforce began work, "(t)he strikers assailed the new comers with stones, and sought to drive them away, but without success" (42). Clearly, in this case, worker solidarity did not prevail.

The following year North Berkshire woolen workers did join forces and cooperate, though they ultimately lost their battle. Workers at three mills running on short time — the Blackinton Mills, the Glen, and the North Adams Woolen Mills — claimed that they had been shortchanged by nearly an hour of work. The mill owners didn't dispute the operatives' contention, but refused to rectify the inequity. "The operatives at Blackinton Village left first, and, after a few days, induced those at the other mills to follow their example." (44)
The owners threatened to close the mills, and the woolen workers "finally decided to return to work" under the short pay arrangement. The Bureau does not record the length of the strike, but does comment on a loss of $10,000 in pay.

Textile workers at another location in North Adams, at the Beaver Cotton Mill, struck during the spring of 1878. The owners proposed a ten percent wage reduction for two months, as an "experiment," to tide them over during a business slump. The workforce split on acceptance, about one-half refusing to work under those conditions. The owners responded by closing the mill. "As long as the strike continued, the help was sustained by contributions from the employes at other mills in the vicinity"(48). Nonetheless, after eight weeks, those wanting to work went back under the reduced wages.

The Bureau's 1880 review of past strikes certainly aids in locating and quantifying strike activity. Further, its narrative, while concise, offers inferences into the culture of working people, their sense of fairness, of cooperation and of solidarity. Yet, from other research and from additional annual reports produced by the Bureau, we know that its 1880 listing is incomplete. In fact, Carroll Wright, the director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor (and later U.S. labor commissioner), while sensitive to the conditions and needs of labor, "subordinated unions to the point of near invisibility," basically ignoring the growth of the Knights of Labor and the early years of the American Federation of Labor (Bedford, 10).

At this point, it will be useful to pursue the issue of strikes up to 1880 by focusing on three workplaces which have received the most historical attention. The goal will be to see how the Bureau's 1880 study stacks up with each case. This analysis will also enable us to look for further insights into worker culture.

The Hoosac Tunnel

No full-scale social or labor history has yet been carried out on the tunnel workers. In the numerous economic, political and technological studies that have been done (e.g. Coyne), few references have been made to worker militance or strike activity. The 1880 Bureau report does not officially credit Hoosac workers with a
strike, but, almost parenthetically, and intriguingly, recognizes such activity there. As aforementioned, a strike had occurred in North Adams by workers in a small railway tunnel in 1875.

The laborers were fired after demanding more money. The rest of the paragraph from the Bureau report merits quoting in full:

A new force of men was engaged. The strikers assailed the newcomers with stones, and sought to drive them away, but without success. While the Hoosac Tunnel was in process of construction, numerous similar strikes occurred; but of these no record remains. They were usually accompanied with rioting and considerable destruction of property, but generally resulted in the defeat of the workmen. (MBSL,1880, emphasis added.)

Terrence Coyne has more to tell us about Tunnel worker strikes:

Under [unsafe] conditions strikes were inevitable and apparently they met with a fair amount of success. The West Shaft workers conducted a successful strike after the bucket crushed the skull of one of their number. They refused to go back to work until the bucket’s hemp rope was replaced with an iron cable...They also struck for higher wages...(151).

Coyne then quotes a reporter for the Troy Times who wrote that “some papers have been severe about the strikes of the men but no reasonable man could see the men at their work and denounce them for asking $1.25 for `sich’ labors.’”

On the whole the local papers, enthusiastic backers of the tunnel project, tended to ignore the difficult conditions of the workers, and even the names of some of the 195 men killed building the massive enterprise. A typical report went like this:

Another Irishman [was] killed at the tunnel. The fuse had been lit but the blast was late. [The victim checked]...but just at the moment the blast went off and a small piece of rock struck the poor fellow’s head and broke it. (See research by Charles Cahoon on identifying the men killed and injured while working on the tunnel.)

Even worse, a lengthy article from Scribner’s Magazine blames the tunnelers for their own injuries and deaths:

Several serious accidents have occurred at the tunnel through...[the] use [of nitroglycerine], but these, so far as the circumstances are known, have been
occasioned by inexcusable carelessness...Most of those at the central shaft are Cornish miners, and their life-long experience in such holes in the ground has made them reckless of danger. The fatal accidents that frequently occur among them have no effect to make them more cautious. (Coyne)

And the state legislature, chief funders of the massive undertaking, ignored the health and safety issues that the tunnelers faced: "No committee busied itself with investigations into the circumstances attending the loss of...lives in its construction; that was an accepted hazard..." (Kirkland 414).

The C.T. Sampson Shoe Factory

In its 1880 history, the Bureau reported two strikes at Sampson's, one in 1868 and the other, the nationally famous 1870 turn-out. From the Bureau’s narrative and from other sources (Rudolph), the pivotal role of the Crispins has been noted in both events. An examination of the 1871 annual report from the Bureau (MBSL,1871), which includes nineteen pages of testimony from Sampson and six shoemakers about the events of 1870, adds further insights to both strikes and to the role of the union. It also mentions a third strike, in 1861.

That strike report has the added credibility of being introduced by Sampson during his testimony. The importance of the event is heightened by its origins—a protest against the introduction of new machinery—and its implications about worker culture and the desire for independence and self-control. Sampson began manufacturing shoes in 1858 and two years later claimed that his factory produced 60 pairs a day:

Introduced the Wells pegging machine, the first made, in 1861. This was about as early as the use of improved machinery became common. The effect of this machine was to increase the number of persons employed. At first, however, all my men left the shop. They said the use of machinery would throw them out of employment; but the foreman told them not to be alarmed, as it would increase the number of hands required. Two-thirds of the men who left were French Canadians. They were out two or three weeks, and then came back to work. They had no organization; but it was the old English experience of strikes against the introduction of machinery. (98)

Later on in his testimony, Sampson discussed additional experiences with
machinery in his shop. Here, one gets the sense that the workers had learned to deal with the machine problem not by striking, but by a form of sabotage:

I undertook to run lasting machines; but the men managed to make it cost me more than to do lasting by hand. The same has been true of other labor-saving machinery. There has been no strike against machinery since the introduction of the pegging machine alluded to. (99)

The testimony of Daniel Luther, "a shoemaker but not a Crispin" (109), a former foreman for Sampson, but at that time, 1871, working elsewhere, adds further information on the strike of 1868:

The last strike was general through the town, and included the shop where I am now working. It was a strike against a reduction of wages to the extent of one dollar per case. We had been waiting for work for three weeks, but were unwilling to work at the reduction. Very few went back. In the course of a month new help was hired, —apprentices,—most of them in town. (110)

With Luther's testimony, not only is there word of a "general" shoe strike, omitted in the 1880 Report, but a different cause is offered for the strike. The 1880 Report credited Crispin dissatisfaction with a non-Crispin worker at Sampson's with the specific cause. From reading all of the testimony in the 1871 Report, much of which discusses the "non-Crispin," it seems likely that both "causes" need to be weighed for an accurate understanding of the 1868 strike.

The Report does not mention that the Chinese strike-breaking in 1870 led to a wage cut and a short strike at the other shoe factories in North Adams (Rudolph 23 and Bennett 65). Of even greater interest are omissions from both the MBSL and Rudolph of Chinese activism in 1873. According to the Providence Journal, the Chinese workers themselves struck Sampson twice that year. The shoemakers wanted to negotiate a new contract with Sampson and they had little trust in their foreman, Charlie Sing (Lee, 254). Ah Coon led the first strike in August when a dozen or so men stopped working. As the Chinese men lived in the same building where they worked, the strike “led to a bizarre daily scenario. The striking men refused to climb the stairs from their living quarters on the ground floor to the bottoming room on the second, preferring instead to hunker in their bunks and take up space in the dormitory
while the workdays passed (Lee 255). Sampson was forced to bring in more Chinese workers from California to take up the slack, and the remaining workers gained a victory by choosing a new foreman and demoting Sing.

When the men struck a second time, Sampson retaliated by discharging them. The strikers blamed Sing and, according to the local paper, “threatened to kill Sing, and [one worker] Ah Coon got hold of a pistol for the purpose” (Lee 256). When Sampson had Ah Coon arrested, about forty Chinese workers "stormed the jail," leading the constable to call for help from the watching crowd. According to the Transcript they attacked the Chinese with "an uncalled for display of spite and brutality." Sampson replaced "about thirty of his Chinese workers" and Ah Coon was given a night in jail and a fine of about twenty-five dollars (Bennett 100-1).

Nonetheless, Sampson continued to employ his Chinese workforce until 1880 when the last of the contracts ended. It is not known if Sampson kept his word paying for the men’s rail trip back to California, but we do know that only two of the Chinese men remained in North Adams (Lee 269).

Blackinton

Baker, in her social history of Blackinton, documents three Blackinton Village strikes, one more than the bureau’s 1880 report lists. Further, her exhaustive reading of the local press along with an informative diary kept by Oscar Archer, Sanford Blackinton’s right hand man, yields the important social and cultural contexts around the strikes. In addition, Baker uncovers one near strike and other instances of worker solidarity and militance.

Baker discusses the 1858 strike, one to regain the wage level the workers had lost during a previous downturn, and notes that the Transcript "vigorously denied the existence of a strike at Blackinton, calling it a 'rumor'” (12). Baker concludes in this instance that while one can't be sure, the Bureau's finding has more credibility than the Transcript’s.

In 1865 a show of solidarity (without recourse to a strike) by Blackinton workers brought them a shorter working day. At the end of the Civil War, textile
operators in Berkshire County still put in twelve to thirteen hour days, despite decades of agitation for a state law mandating a ten-hour day. In September textile workers throughout the county held meetings and wrote petitions to their employers asking for an eleven hour day. This time, within a week, Blackinton and most of the other local mill owners acquiesced. No doubt the workers and the Transcript saw the end of chattel slavery as one more reason to reduce wage slavery. The local paper took the side of the workers in this case, stating that "free labor slavery in the North is going the same road as slave labor in the South, as an inevitable consequence of the abolition of the latter" (Baker 13-14).

A strike nearly occurred at Blackinton in November, 1873, an event ignored by both the Bureau and the Transcript, but recorded in Archer's diary. The workers had met and taken a vote to strike after seeing their wages cut by twelve and a half percent. They had been forced to accept a half-time work week following the financial crash of October, and now Blackinton wanted to return to a full week but with a significant cut in wages. Archer claims to have talked the operatives out of a strike by stressing the financial difficulties of the firm and "that 'if they turned out they would probably stay out'" (Ibid. 14).

The economic effects of the Panic of 1873 lingered over the next several years and on January 1, 1876 Sanford Blackinton followed other local mill owners in reducing wages by ten percent. An eight day strike, not reported by the Bureau, followed. Baker's research offers insight into the reasons for the strike. A new superintendent, and one disliked, had been installed at the Braytonville mill and many workers held him responsible for the ten percent cut. Perhaps more importantly, the reduction came "at a time when the workers, according to Archer, thought the mill to be profitable" (Ibid. 15).

Another, more extensive strike, and one covered by the Bureau, followed in the Fall of the year. Hard times worsened during the year and Blackinton enacted wage cuts of ten and fifteen percent in June. In July, the mill switched to three-quarters time plus forty-five minutes, but the workers, as the Bureau indicates,
received no wages for the "extra" forty-five minutes. They protested, but to no avail.

Finally, on October 20, they revolted. After working eight and three-quarters hours—the number of hours for which they were getting paid—they walked out, demanding exact three-quarters time for three-quarters wages. They were immediately discharged and the mill was closed.

Within a week the operatives at Braytonville and the Glen were also on strike. At issue in this strike, as it had been in January, was the belief of the workers that times had improved enough to warrant normal wages. (Baker 16-7)

Sanford Blackinton responded by announcing that strikers living in company houses would be evicted and that they would receive no credit from the company stores. Some workers who could left town while others organized a committee "to get aid from neighboring towns" (Baker). They managed to stay out for three and one-half weeks but returned to receive the same rate of pay which had precipitated the strike.

By the late 19th century then, the evidence suggests that while the struggles of North Berkshire industrial workers did not always result in immediate gain, they nonetheless exhibited a strong sense of unity and class solidarity. They unionized and struck as the situation demanded, in events often unreported by the local press. Yet they still continued to labor long hours under often insecure working conditions.

CLASS, SOCIAL LIFE AND CULTURE AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Historians have referred to the "Gilded Age," roughly the last third of the nineteenth century, as a time of industrial, railroad, oil and banking concentration, a time when great fortunes could be made. Capitalist elites did not hide their wealth and built great mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, the southern Berkshires and on Church St. in North Adams. In 1872, Sanford Blackinton moved from his very large house by the mill to a new ornate mansion on lower Church Street, serving as a figurative gatekeeper to the numerous homes to be built by the city’s elite in the coming years. In 1898, A.C. Houghton bought the Blackinton mansion and gave it to the city for its public library.

As more and more of the country’s wealth went into the pockets of the top one percent and the corporations they controlled, a greater sense of class consciousness grew within the working class. A national railroad strike in the summer of 1877, often
referred to as “the Great Uprising of 1877,” brought with it violent struggle between the forces of the railroad corporations, who were aided for the first time by government troops, and striking rail workers. Those workers had seen their wages reduced again and again since 1873 and worked under very hazardous conditions. In Massachusetts alone, an average of forty-two railroad workers lost their lives each year from accidents (Levine et al. 554).

The strike began on July 16th in Martinsburg, West Virginia and for the first time federal troops were ordered to put down a labor rebellion. (Not coincidentally, plenty of troops were now available for such activities since they had been withdrawn from the South as Reconstruction was brought to an end the previous spring.) Federal and state militias and local police forces fired on protesting workers in Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Chicago. Pitched battles broke out and dozens were killed and wounded, mostly strikers. While the strikers ultimately lost the war, the labor movement gained strength continuing on into the 1880s (Ibid 558). Fear of future uprisings led communities to build armories and organize local militias. Undoubtedly that was the reason that a militia company came to be organized in North Adams on August 27th, 1877 (Spear 502).

Populist parties and organizations, which focused their anger at the growing corporate power of the railroads and banks, tended to coalesce in backing William Jennings Bryan’s bid for the presidency in 1896. His defeat in that campaign seemed to represent the last great hope for labor, small business and the populist spirit as the capitalist ascendancy continued. For North Berkshire, Bryan’s victorious opponent, William McKinley, symbolized the “gilded” order. As the chief proponent for a protective tariff in the Senate, McKinley spoke for the economic interests of the region’s textile magnates, particularly William B. Plunkett of Adams. After the McKinley Tariff passed Congress in 1892 and helped ensure the future profitability of Plunkett’s mill, Plunkett built a second and larger factory. Three thousand local residents, along with Senator McKinley, attended the dedication of that mill (Carney 162). Adam’s leading capitalist developed a strong friendship with McKinley and hosted two presidential visits to Adams during the last decade of the century.

As we have previously seen, however, the "labor question," as it had come to be called, remained a reality in the workplaces of North Berkshire. Perhaps because of that, and also because of the heightened national fear of radical change --only a decade had passed since the “Haymarket affair” (Green) and the ensuing media
obsession of an anarchist threat-- local elites did their best to downplay labor strife and strove to present a public front of unity, harmony and opportunity for all.

In 1897, the inaugural remarks of North Adams' first mayor, former president of Arnold Print Works and one of the wealthiest men in the region, Albert C. Houghton, well exemplified this spirit. After highlighting "the substantial absence of labor difficulties here," Houghton went on to paint the following class picture:

Our capital and capitalists have been developed here from humble beginnings and through assiduous labor. As a result we have had little class distinction and no idle wealth. Differences of race and religion, elsewhere hindrances to concert of action with us only increased the variety and strength of our commingled and combined ability. (Rowe and Fairfield 12)

A local editor went even further than the mayor: In North Adams, he argued, "There is little or no class feeling, no distinction of masses and classes...No town or city in New England has less conflict of labor and capital. (Ibid.,45)

Writing about a time some three decades earlier, Social Gospel minister Washington Gladden sounded a similar tone:

North Adams was, indeed, a good sample of a New England democracy...nothing had yet occurred to disturb the sense of equality which characterized all social relations...Indeed, there was nothing resembling a social stratification in the society of North Adams at that day...That class consciousness which some of our industrial leaders are so eager to cultivate would have been wholly inconceivable to the people of this New England town. (160-1)

Yet within a few years, with the coming of Sampson's Chinese strike breakers, Gladden recognized a changing of the times, "the labor question having arrived in North Adams "in a somewhat virulent form" (Ibid.,171). Or as an historian of that era saw it, "The aristocracy of North Adams may well have been in embryo; but so was the challenge" (Rudolph,7).

To protect themselves from this growing power imbalance within the industrial economy, North Berkshire workers continued to use the weapon of the strike. We have already seen this option utilized at Blackinton, which had no union, and at Sampson's shoe factory, which had a militant local of the largest national union of its time, the Knights of St. Crispin. The Crispins, like the soon to be dominant Knights
of Labor, favored worker cooperatives, where workers could escape wage exploitation entirely and democratically control their work environment.

And it was precisely to the coop that the Crispins turned after they failed to organize the Chinese strikebreakers in 1870. Thirty-one shoemakers initiated the North Adams coop with $6,000 in capital from sixty shares of stock. Most of the workers owned shares, but not all, as the coop employed forty-four. Among the workforce were nine women, prohibited by state law from owning shares. The coop purchased its own building on Brooklyn St. as well as a pegging machine and six sewing machines. Off to a good start, the Crispins manufactured one hundred cases of shoes a week (Bennett, 66-7). The coop’s capital stock increased by $4,000 and tallied a profit of $1,000 at the end of four months. Further, when a business decline forced a closure of the other shoe factories in town in November, only the coop, along with Sampson’s factory, remained in operation (Ibid. 67). The press in the Northeast, including the Transcript, backed the cooperative model, certainly as a substitute for strikes (Ibid.). During that first season, the MBSL reported that “The men at work speak with pride of their new feelings of self-reliance and freedom, as well as of the quality of their work and the tendencies developed toward a more economical production than before” (MBSL, 1872, 456).

Coops appeared to be a popular model for Massachusetts workers at that time, and not just for Crispins, as the reports from the same MBSL volume give accounts of a coop grocery in Randolph, a coop and ten supply stores in Fall River, a machine shop coop in Greenfield, a coop manufacturing stoves in Somerset, and a cigar makers’ coop in Westfield (Ibid., 454-7). Along with eighteen other shoe coops throughout the state, the North Adams operation continued to survive (Bennett 95). The Panic of 1873, however, proved its downfall as it did for many capitalist firms, and the Crispin coop closed down by March of that year, after about two and a half years of existence (Ibid. 96).

The Knights of Labor, Worker Culture and the Celebration of Labor Day

With the demise of the Crispins, the next major union to take root in North Berkshire, and in the nation for that matter, proved to be the Knights of Labor. Membership in the Knights was open to all, with the exception of the Chinese, a group that suffered from virulent racism during that period. The Knights grew rapidly in the 1880’s, riding the wave of the eight hour day movement and the growing prosperity in the United States. The Knights generally organized on an industrial
model, enrolling all workers regardless of skills or sex within an industry, and also on a geographical basis. The national union reached its peak in 1886, the year of the first Labor Day celebration in the Berkshires.

The local event came just four years after the first recorded Labor Day observance in the United States, a festive march and picnic by some 10,000 workers and their families in New York City on Sept. 5, 1882. The practice of setting aside a special day to honor workers and specific crafts can be traced back to ancient times and continued through the Middle Ages. At the end of the eighteenth century, during the French Revolution, a day in September achieved the designation of a labor holiday. In the United States during the 1800’s labor unions often used celebrations, picnics, parades and demonstrations to rally support for the causes of working people.

In 1886 in North Berkshire, mill workers put in a 10 hour day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year. They didn’t work on Sundays and enjoyed six unpaid holidays. Their only other time off came from unpaid layoffs and plant shutdowns. In the cotton mills, weekly wages averaged $6, with women and children making significantly less. In the woolen mills, the weekly wage averaged about $8.50, and in shoes and leather about $10. Entire families worked in the mills, the only way in which many households could survive. Throughout the state, ten percent of all 10 to 15 year olds labored for pay, mostly in manufacturing.

The prospect of a day off at the end of the summer, even if unpaid, for rest and relaxation, must have filled local workers and their families with excited anticipation. In 1886, in this context, the Knights of Labor in North Berkshire called for a seventh holiday — one to commemorate the contributions of labor. It would be eight years before Labor Day would become a national holiday, so the local Knights stood as relative pioneers in the forefront of the celebration of labor.

They respectfully communicated to the local mill owners their desire to have production stop on the first Monday in September, the 6th. Most manufacturers and employers responded favorably to the Knights' request and a sizeable local contingent attended the festivities. In fact, more than 3,000 people —some of them coming in by
train from as far as Hoosick Falls and Greenfield— participated in a huge field day and picnic at the fairgrounds off State Road. Several railroad companies lowered their rates for the occasion and a local band met those travelers at the station. Many of the celebrants marched to the fairgrounds in a procession beginning about ten o’clock led by an official of the Knights of Labor "in a blue coat and scarlet sash, manly and martial-like, on horseback" (Hoosac Valley News).

Most of the sporting events began at two o’clock but at least one ball game, between the lasters of H.T. Cady’s shoe shop and local cigar makers, started before lunch. So did the singing, provided by the Knights of Labor glee club. The regular lunch-time "dinner" went for thirty-five cents, but no record could be found of the cost of the clambake which began at five. In between, the revelers had access to snacks.

Both of the local newspapers gave prominent attention to the speeches, providing excerpts and summaries in their post-Labor Day editions. The speakers, mostly clergy, praised the contributions of working people, worried about the continued low-wage immigration to the U.S., lectured on the evils of alcohol and cautioned the crowd about alleged anarchist violence. Earlier that year, in response to violence at a workers’ rally in Chicago’s Haymarket park, a concerted media and government campaign attacked anarchists and other labor radicals (Green). That campaign not only locked up, executed and drove leftists out of the labor movement, it effectively ended the drive for the eight hour day, and soon brought about the destruction of the Knights of Labor. For speakers at a Knights’ sponsored celebration to attack the anarchists only added to the national campaign and, ironically, helped speed up the demise of the Knights.

The last speaker, James Goodacre, a leading member of the Knights of Labor, focused his speech entirely on specific problems facing labor and on suggestions for change. A dedicated egalitarian, Goodacre demanded the right to vote for women and “equal pay for equal work.” He also noted that this year the Knights had to ask their employers for the day off. Before too long he hoped that would no longer be necessary as workers would be their own bosses, through the cooperative movement.
championed by the Knights. At that time, the local shoe cooperative had already failed, but the Knights had been contemplating a retail store cooperative. Goodacre also exhorted the crowd to call for an end to the "great wrong" of child labor:

I have seen little children at the tender ages of eight, nine and ten years, some right here in North Adams, working right in the Union (Mill), and in every other mill in the land...Is it not an everlasting shame and disgrace? At five minutes before six in the morning you can see the little ones entering the mill doors, North, South, East and West...Can not we in some way stop this degrading business?

It was, of course, a practice difficult to stop as low wages and outright poverty in local families forced mothers and fathers to send their children into the mills to supplement the family wage. For those families and individuals unable to make a living wage, the last resort was the notorious “poor farm.” Typically a farm run by a local family, it served as a place for destitute men, women and children to reside and work, supported by the local town. The first North Berkshire poor farm was established in Adams in 1868 and was sold to North Adams in 1884. Excerpts from the annual report of the “city almoner and overseer of the poor,” William Woodhead in 1898, provides an insight into the conditions of the time as well as the attitudes of city officials.

(The past year has been one of continued business depression, and...the expense of this department has largely increased over that of last year, increased by reason of the larger number who have been aided, and not on account of any increase in the amount given to the applicants...We must bear in mind that the population of the city is increasing, and with that the work of this department must also increase. To the worthy and the needy poor, we desire to be of assistance, but with that intemperate and worthless class we have no sympathy; these are the class whose only usefulness seems to be to propagate paupers.

The North Adams poor farm, often referred to as the city infirmary, located on a section of Southview Cemetery (!), lasted into the 1960s, though the city’s poor were aided in the 1930s by the legislation of the New Deal, providing widow’s benefits, Social Security and aid to families with dependent children (The Transcript, February 27, 1989).
After the speeches by Goodacre and others, a full afternoon of sporting events followed. Winners of the bicycle and foot races received cash prizes, and those with a desire to gamble wagered on the horse races with the top purse at $20. A second ball game, a five inning affair, went to the W.L. Brown team. Not yet ready to end their holiday at sundown, North Berkshire’s first Labor Day celebrants packed the Odd Fellows’ Hall and danced until midnight.

The following year the town of Adams hosted the North Berkshire Labor Day. For the next quarter century, residents of the region celebrated the holiday in numerous ways, but sporadically. The sponsor of the events varied, from labor groups to temperance societies. But as political speechmaking declined, the focus turned more and more to parades and sports.

In 1889, militant shoe workers who had shut down four North Adams factories in a strike over wages played a central part in the Labor Day celebration. The local paper called it "by far the most successful of labor days here." The parade began on Eagle Street and included a platoon of police, the North Adams Musical association band, two branches of the International Boot and Shoe Workers Union, representatives of the Cigar Makers’ union, and the North Adams Fire Department. Marchers could be seen unfurling banners demanding the eight hour day.

A full slate of sporting events, including bicycle and foot races, a baseball game, and horse and dog races, drew the interest of the crowd. Another event, the “hose race” between groups of firefighters, found "abundant interest” from spectators. In this event, teams ran 200 yards with their pipe, laid out 800 feet of hose, coupled them and attached the nozzle, all vying for the fastest possible time. Before long, North Adams would become a western Massachusetts center of the Firemen’s Muster, with its appealing sport and pageantry.

Many in the crowd that day in 1889 listened to Dr. Edward McGlynn of New York, a well-known orator and supporter of the single tax theory. The tax, originally proposed by Henry George, would be levied on all land whether being used or not. This would pressure speculators to utilize or sell their lands, thus lowering the cost of natural resources, raising production, and increasing the demand and wages for labor. McGlynn expressed this very popular, pro-labor
theory clearly and forcefully in a "strong, rich controlling voice". He also spoke out for nationalization of the railroads, telegraphs, and telephones — all community resources needed by the entire population.

As with earlier Labor Day celebrations, the night brought dancing. The local reporter pronounced all of the day's events successful and also noted: “There was no drunkenness on the streets or fair grounds, and not a single arrest was made for that offense, which can rarely be said of any holiday in North Adams.”

The Lasters' Protective Union sponsored the next three annual field days. In 1891 the announced speaker, Dr. McGlynn, did not appear and the following year no mention of a speaker could be found. For the first time, the press report on the 1892 celebration observed that many local folks left town for the day on several excursions. Nonetheless, a sizeable crowd attended and enjoyed a popular tug-of-war match in which the North Adams team defeated a team from its neighbor to the south.

In 1894, a non-labor-oriented sponsor, the Father Matthew Temperance Society, organized the events of the day. As was the case in much of the rest of the country, temperance had become a popular cause in North Berkshire in the late 19th century. The 1894 festivities, which drew a crowd of 4-5,000, were totally devoted to sports with no mention of union participation or speeches of any kind.

While the next few Labor Days seemed relatively quiet in North Berkshire, local workers made themselves known in Pittsfield in 1899 in what may have been the largest Labor Day celebration ever to have been held in the county. In fact 1899 was a year of numerous events throughout and just beyond Berkshire County, and in all cases local residents participated. Clearly now, the celebrations had become more specialized, with the workforce dividing by skill, ethnicity and politics. While local French societies met in Northampton, 800 Irish Hibernians from North Adams journeyed to Troy, the skilled United Workmen from the region headed for a field day in Dalton, and local temperance groups convened in Westfield.

The largest crowd of all, however, estimated at 8,000, met in Pittsfield for a field day celebration of labor unions. Nearly a quarter of that total arrived in eighteen
rail cars from North Adams and Adams. In the lengthy parade, North Adams contributed three bands and a drum corps, as well as marchers from the building trades, cigarmakers, textile workers, shoemakers, bartenders, typographers, bakers and iron molders. A North Adams team won the tug-of-war, but the local baseball team, not as fortunate, lost to Pittsfield 7-5.

Social Life and Living Conditions

The workplace and the union served as a basis of integration and solidarity, and, as earlier noted by the changing nature of the Labor Day observation, so did the ethnic group. One of the largest groups to immigrate to North Berkshire were French-speaking Catholics from Quebec. They left their homeland “not in quest of a higher standard of living but to avoid a lower” (Notre Dame Centennial 6). Part of a sizeable migration from French-Canada, they left behind low-producing farmlands and land unable to support the growth of large families (Roberts 7). Drawn by the lumbering and mill economy, by 1860 one hundred French Canadians lived in Adams. Their numbers grew to 1,650 by 1871 when a French pastor arrived to serve the region’s parishioners (Roberts 23) At the beginning of the next century, French-Canadians numbered 5,000, about a quarter of the local population (Ibid. 24). The mills in particular provided employment. One descendant of a family that arrived in the Berkshires in 1902 could recall that “[t]he cotton and woolen mills were going full blast! There was a lot of work here, and a lot of the plants...provided a lot of places for housing.” (Shears)

In Canada many of the early immigrants worked as farmers or skilled craftsmen. In North Berkshire some continued to ply their trades, while others worked in the mills or on the railroad. As employees, "strike" and "layoff" became part of their new English vocabulary. They kept in touch with relatives back in Canada, often traveling back themselves. Relatively speaking, they more likely than not saw life here as "satisfactory" (Ibid. 38). According to the 1870 census, most of the
young French-Canadian men, fifty in all, worked in the shoe factories. “Laborer” described the occupation of fifteen of the men, and scattered groups of four or less worked at skilled jobs, as masons and carpenters, and one was employed as a physician. A sizeable group, thirty-four in 1870, worked on the building of the Hoosac Tunnel but they were easily outnumbered by Irish laborers, who migrated to North Adams even earlier (Ibid. 34). Still, the French-speaking population continued to grow in North Adams. Many lived in the Greylock section of town, worked in the Greylock mill, worshipped at the French church across from the mill, and sent their children to the French school next to the church. Notre Dame, a second French church, larger and more ornate than the Greylock church, served a population closer to downtown, with its location on East Main Street. Overall, for that first generation of French-Canadian immigrants, an environment where they could live and pray in their native tongue had a top priority. The importance of language and heritage can be seen by the following description of a local French elementary school:

School was...taught by nuns...You had to wear semi-uniforms, dark pants and white shirts for boys and girls had a uniform type, a jumper and blouse. In the morning, it would switch, one year you would have math, English, geography, and history. Then in the afternoon you had Canadian history, you had Canadian grammar, reading and writing. They also had religion class, in French, all afternoon. (Shears 2-3)

The first known Catholic mass celebrated by Irish parishioners occurred in 1848, led by Father Jeremiah O’Callaghan who traveled to North Adams by horseback from Burlington, Vermont. By 1856, the Irish community had increased in size enabling it to own its first church, on Center Street, a purchase from the Methodists (Pugliese). “The burgeoning Irish Catholics soon outgrew that church and in 1863, Father Charles Lynch came to North Adams as the first pastor for the Irish Catholics.” Soon a new “proper church” was built thanks to “the labor of Irish workmen after their 10 to 12 hour days in the mills and mines” (Ibid.).

Many of the unmarried Irish tunnel workers lived in the shanties described in
1871 by the tunnel paymaster:

There are about 25 double shanties and 8 single shanties, at the East end of the Tunnel. There are 7 double shanties and 8 single shanties, at the central shaft; at the West end, 18 double shanties and 20 single shanties... At a great many of the shanties, they keep boarders...The miners, rockmen, &c., who have no families board at the shanties. They are filthy, dirty places.” (MBSL,1972,440-1)

The paymaster quickly added, however, that the tenants "are all healthy. There is no more healthy class of men, that I know of, than the miners" (Ibid. 441). While the miners may have been able to survive their housing conditions, the work itself proved not as hospitable. The same man reported on the occurrence of

90 and 100 fatal accidents since the tunnel was first started. There are many accidents that are not fatal; men get their eyes put out and limbs broken; but get over it, and we don't hear of them. In some cases of accident, the State has made compensation;—but these cases occurred before the Shanley contract was made. If a man was badly hurt, his case was considered and they frequently gave him $100 or $300—— $500 is the most ever paid. You would have to ask them to ascertain what their practice is in such matters. (Ibid. 441, emphasis in original)

In 1868 the state contracted with Walter and Francis Shanley from Canada to take charge of finishing the tunnel. Their supervision extended to the shanties which the state rented to the Shanleys for company housing. The miners apparently paid no additional rent to the Shanleys, at least while work continued. But "(t)hey are at their own expense, while the machinery is out of order" (Ibid., 441). Further, as the state contract specified, "The contractors shall use their best efforts to keep intoxicating liquors from their employes, and to promote orderly conduct among them; and shall, when required by the engineer, discharge any men who shall be careless, negligent, or incompetent, or guilty of conduct prejudicial to good order" (Ibid.,441-2).

The same volume of the MBSL also reported on the working conditions of the tunnel laborers. At that time three shifts of men worked round the clock six days a week for two dollars a day. When the men weren't working or sleeping, they cut wood for fuel and drew water for the family "a considerable distance, being obtained from a brook at the mouth of the tunnel" (Ibid. 346). If they had cash, they shopped at the stores in town, but can only get credit at the company store where, according to
the state investigator "charges for goods...are much higher than at the village stores."

(Ibid.)

One of the workmen informed us, that, having been sick and unable to work, he received no wages for six months, during which he subsisted on his credit at the store. He had resumed work, but had received no wages, and did not expect to receive any, until the debt which accrued during his sickness, was discharged...(He) also stated, that a good many workmen came there without money, and were obliged to trade at the store, under the order system, in order to subsist until they received their first month's wages; and it sometimes happened that such person's wages, at the end of the month, would be insufficient to discharge his indebtedness, and he would be kept from month to month in this way, without having any ready money. (Ibid. emphasis in original)

The report briefly noted the principle health difficulty of the miners (throat diseases) caused by the temperature differences between the tunnel and the surface. At times, a priest from St. Francis Church in North Adams, one and a half miles away, held Mass at the Central Shaft location and in that residential area of Florida known as Hoosac Tunnel (Day 35). "They are not, as a general rule, regular church-goers, but their children mostly go to Sunday school." (MBSL, op. cit.) As for the school for workers' children, the report offered more detail here. One hundred and forty students reported to one teacher who "stated that it was impossible to do them any justice, or to teach them much, there were so many." All 141 of them were crammed into the school house, fifty feet by thirty feet and nine feet high. The report deemed it "wholly unfit," like the tenements where the children lived with their families. Perhaps surprisingly, most of the pupils had learned how to read (Ibid.).

For its 1880 report, the Labor Bureau investigated the "Social Life of Workingmen" throughout the state. By social life, they meant clubs and lodges, bands and choirs, libraries and lyceums, parks and recreational facilities, museums and theatres. We are not told if any of the tunnel laborers participated in this social life, as the report offers no information on the background of participants. The fact that North Adams earned an "excellent" rating, in the top four percent of the more than two hundred cities and towns responding, for its "social life," may suggest that the town had begun to develop a significant middle class, or at least elements of a solid and
secure working class, yet the tunnelers likely stood outside these strata.

Not all immigrant groups could be found working in the mills or tunnel. For the relatively small number of African-Americans who came to North Adams, emigrating from the South, census records suggest that Black men did not work in the mills until the first part of the twentieth century. It is likely that discrimination played a role, with the first record of mill work not occurring until the 1920 census. Census records recorded 38 Black residents in Adams as far back as 1850, a time when the North village was still part of Adams. The number increased to 57 in 1870 and with the 1880 census, the first one with North Adams separating from Adams, the African-American population of North Adams totaled thirty-nine. By 1900, that number had more than doubled to 93. Women’s occupations clustered around domestic service, while the men tended to work as laborers, teamsters and barbers (Maloy).

While there were a few Jewish families in North Adams prior to 1880, migration increased during the 1880s on into the first part of the twentieth century, as part of a huge wave of immigration from Russia and Eastern Europe. By 1890, 25 Jewish families lived in North Adams. They formed a close religious community with a smaller number of Jewish families in Adams and built their first house of worship, or synagogue, in 1894 (Pugliese 16). In Eastern Europe, facing pogroms and persecution, Jews were often not allowed to own land and many survived by peddling or operating small stores. As with all immigrant groups, a correspondence developed between the first arrivals and families and friends in the old country, bringing news of the new world and of prospects for work and survival. According to one historian, “Some of the early arrivals...sent back news that the area’s mills and factories were booming and retail stores and markets were needed.” And that early generation of Jews responded by starting small retail markets, selling shoes, groceries, furniture and dry goods.

The importance of recreation and sports has already been noted by the events of the Labor Day celebrations. In addition, the easy availability of hunting, fishing, swimming and hiking in the Berkshires added to outdoor activities. By 1886, interest in establishing a YMCA led to the organization establishing its own building in 1901.
with a gym, bowling alley and baths (Old Home Week Souvenir).

Many of the mills were located in diverse ethnic neighborhoods and, for the most part, men and women walked to work, though it was not always a short walk. Horse-drawn trolleys arrived in North Adams in the 1880s, but by the end of the decade trolley electrification had arrived. The lines, which continued to expand throughout Berkshire County and on into neighborhood states, served as an important form of transportation, though they came to an end in the 1930s (Cassagio).

Century’s End: Expansion at Home and Abroad

As the 19th century drew to a close. President William McKinley visited Adams for the third time to help William B. Plunkett celebrate the expansion of his textile empire, the opening of Mill No. 4 of the Berkshire Cotton Manufacturing Company. Sizeable crowds greeted the president in both Adams and North Adams, many perhaps celebrating the nation’s own expansion to the Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico) and Asia (the Philippines). It is likely that few in that crowd were invited to a huge banquet in Boston in February, 1899 where Plunkett invited President McKinley to speak. The event celebrated the peace treaty with Spain after the U.S. had captured Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. “It was the biggest banquet in the nation’s history; two thousand diners, four hundred waiters.” William James, the Harvard philosopher, who, along with Mark Twain, helped to form the Anti-Imperialist League, wrote a letter to the Boston Transcript criticizing “the cold pot grease of McKinley’s cant” at the banquet, with particular vehemence to the massive killing in the Phillipines. At another time, James had angrily proclaimed, “God damn the U.S. for its vile conduct in the Philippine Isles.” (Zinn 314-5)

Local unions became involved in a controversy associated with a visit by President McKinley to North Adams for a speech and parade on June 26, 1899. This controversy, however, had nothing to do with McKinley’s wars or domestic policy. In
the 1880s and 1890s local trade unions had been organizing and expanding, reflecting the national growth of the American Federation of Labor and the craft union movement. (The AFL, born in 1886, focused on organizing skilled workers, solely based on craft, such as carpenters, electricians, machinists or masons.) Earlier the City Council had discussed the appropriation of $400 for the presidential visit. The Council favored the allocation despite the fact that the city solicitor, following an earlier decision made in Springfield, indicated that such an appropriation would be illegal. The Central Labor Union in North Adams, whose seventy delegates represented fourteen labor unions with a membership of 1,000, also objected to the spending of public funds on the visit, on the grounds that it would be illegal. To emphasize the point that they supported President McKinley and wanted him to come to the city, the Central Labor Union contributed twenty five dollars of its own money to entertainment for the visit. Despite the union’s position and a similar view by the Transcript, the Council voted a second time to use public funds.

Outside of criticism over the Council’s action, the mood was celebratory among the thousands attending the dedication ceremony in Adams and the parade in North Adams. The Transcript, in referring to W.B. Plunkett, editorialized, "Let him continue to build giant mills in Adams and bring presidents to lay the corner stones and dedicate them." Mayor Cady, in introducing the president to the North Adams throng, praised the war McKinley so avidly pursued: "While this [Spanish-American War] expansion has been going on, adding new territory and population, there has also been great expansion in the commercial world; we in North Adams are realizing this in every sense of the word." The Transcript also printed lengthy excerpts from a local Congregationalist sermon the day before which found biblical support for the war! The atmosphere in the country had changed. Jingoism and military expansion became celebrated. As the Washington Post editorialized:

A new consciousness seems to have come upon us…and with it a new appetite, the yearning to show our strength…Ambition, interest, land hunger, pride, the mere joy of fighting, whatever it may be, we are animated by a new sensation. We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as
the taste of blood in the jungle…(Zinn 299)

On the whole, 1899 proved to be a very busy year for the local working class. In January, the North Adams Central Labor Union, a federation of the city’s various labor unions, appointed a committee to express its dissatisfaction to the Mayor for contracting work out on the new city "barn" in a manner not provided for by the charter. Also that month, the Barbers Union supported the idea of licensing barbers, the local Typographical Union voted to send money to help striking shoe workers in Marlborough and the rank and file established a union at the Deerfield Valley Ice Co. The trustees of the public library received a petition from 160 North Adams Italian residents to place some books printed in their native tongue in the library.

Several examples will suffice for CLU activities through the remainder of the year: In February, they endorsed the publication of the "Union Workman" in Springfield. In March the CLU supported a City Council appropriation of $600 for summer open air concerts. In April the CLU protested the introduction of a 10 hour day by contractors and supported the 9 hour day, and in May they discussed the establishment of a permanent county organization for the celebration of Labor Day.

Warmer weather coincided with a rash of strikes in the region. In May, pullers-over at the N. L. Millard & Co. shoe plant successfully struck over work and wages. In June one group of carpenters successfully struck over back pay. An unsuccessful strike over wages occurred among women in the sewing room at the Blackinton Mill during July. That same month, folders at the Arnold Print Works saw their strike end in compromise. In August the "boys" in the spinning and carding rooms from the Eclipse Mill struck for a night work increase and in December won an increase in wages.

In August, the carpenters successfully negotiated for the employment of only union men in the construction of the new Richmond Hotel. A September entry in the 1900 MBLS annual volume carried the following interesting report on regional solidarity and labor discipline: "Central Labor Union adopted resolution of
Typographical Union 316 relating to the *New York Sun*, and imposed fine of $2 on every member of CLU. who purchased said paper..." (Ibid., 201). That same month night work began at the Adams Bros. Manufacturing Co. with the installation of electric lights.

October saw the beginning of active work by the CLU in the political campaign. However, the next month the Lasters Union withdrew from the CLU because "that latter body brought political matters into the meeting, which is against principles of Lasters Union" (Ibid.). Also, in November, a 47 member Clerks Union organized and received a charter. On a "social note," W.C. Ellis dedicated his new shoe factory (originally built for F. J. Barber) with a dance for his employees and "about 250 of their friends" (Ibid.,227).

It must have been a good year for the Williamstown Manufacturing Co. as they increased wages for the second time in December. James Hunter Machine Co. bought land to build a new foundry and became a union shop, as requested by the New England delegate of the National Molders Associations. Minimum wages at Hunter also increased by twenty-five cents to $2.50 per day. Finally, local shoe cutters decided to re-affiliate with the general body of the Boot and Shoe Workers Union.

While one historian of nineteenth century Berkshire County may have been correct about Adams in the early 1880’s — “There were no capitalists in Adams” (Beers, 469)— the economic and social reality of Victorian mansions and upper class lifestyles could not be ignored during the Gilded Age. As we have seen, a concentration of county elites could be found in North Berkshire, and by the end of the century they controlled significant textile holdings. They were household names — Blackinton, Arnold, Houghton and Plunkett— and their economic and social power brought them political influence at the local and national levels. The North Berkshire press heralded their commercial accomplishments and North Adams’ mayor praised the confluence of local growth and national expansion.

Yet one needs to remember that during the same year, 1899, 41 of the city’s very poor were living at what the North Adams Annual Report referred to as the “Almshouse,” commonly called the “Poor Farm” or “Infirmary.” A working farm inauspiciously located in Southview Cemetery, it remained a city institution until after World War II. At a time when Federal relief aid remained in the distant future, those down on their luck -- widows, the elderly, the disabled, and those just not able to find
work-- and who had no other place to turn to ended up at the “Almshouse.”

If a capitalist class held sway in the region, a sizeable working class had emerged as well. Predominantly immigrant, the bulk of North Adams’ 1900 population of 24,200 worshipped in the growing number of ethnically-based Catholic churches. While adjusting to the industrialization of the area, local workers had demonstrated a value system emphasizing wage and hour equity for the same work, solidarity between workforces, a pride in their work and a reluctance to be deskilled, as well as a willingness to fight to maintain their employment and living standards, particularly if they felt the state of the economy warranted it.

They had their own leaders, some nameless, some not, and formed their own unions. They had a good sense of local issues, but also responded to state and national events which affected them. They opposed child labor, fighting for wages at work that would allow them to keep their children in school, instead of sending them to the mills. And as with their fellow workers throughout the country, they agitated for a shorter work day. They used the strike and the threat of the strike to improve their position, and when the strike option no longer existed, they tried to adapt by, for example, forming cooperatives.

At the turn of the century, two generations of unions, the Crispins and the Knights of Labor, had gone by the boards and most of the unionization came under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor, with its craft unions of skilled workers. The local unions met as a central labor council where representatives considered matters of mutual concern and mapped out political strategy. "Organized" labor had coalesced to meet the challenge of organized capitalism. It did so in a context, however, in which divisions within the working class had become more evident. And so, while, 1899’s Labor Day celebration included the largest number of the region’s workers ever at such an event, the day also saw local workers travel to diverse sites organized on the basis of skill, politics and ethnicity.
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